

LITTLE TOMTIT—

A Story of the Orient

—By H. Bedford-Jones

"Taking Off the Luxury Tax"

By Ring W. Lardner.

WE WERE in the lounge room of the club, at Tientsin, at the moment.

"Business has nothing to do with romance," observed Tomtit sagely, "but the romance of business has a good deal to do with the business of romance, if you get my meaning."

"That," said Crayton, coarsely, "is because you're a poet and a fool, Tomtit!"

A stiff silence followed. The boys discreetly vanished. We all thought that Tomtit had been goaded for Crayton, and we secretly hoped there would be a knockdown and a scandal, so that we could kick Crayton out of the club.

Tomtit only smiled, and patted his dress tie with an air of approval. He quite ignored the "Tomtit" which Crayton invariably gung at him.

"My good Crayton," he said pleasantly, "you don't like me. Why?" Crayton glared savagely at him.

"I tell you why! Because you've come to China a green cub and are running wild up and down the coast, that's why! You club your poetry and your dashed nonsense—I'll ruin business for the rest of us!"

"Hope so," said Tomtit sweetly. "It won't ruin my business, though! You can't make friends among Chinese gentlemen by eulogizing their treasures in verse! I can. You go around buying jewelry and art paintings and things with money! I buy 'em with money plus poetry, which means a lot more to an impoverished classical scholar."

"All bull!" growled Crayton, getting red. "You and your classical rot!"

Tomtit regarded him with a maddening suavity.

"Ah!" he said, putting a singular meaning into the word. "Ah! Let me tell you something. I'm off for Fuchow in the morning, to get that screen from the old mandarin Wing."

At this, Crayton came bounding out of his chair. His hand slipped to his arm, and for an instant I thought he meant to shoot Tomtit. Rank murder was in his eyes. Then he mastered himself, and stood there trembling with fury.

"Look here!" His voice was thick and hoarse. "I've been after that screen for a year. I mean to get it. I have an order for it. It's mine! If you but into my affairs, I'll run you out of China! Understand that?"

Tomtit, who was rather lanky, but singularly graceful and alert, bowed mockingly from his hips. That bow should have warned Crayton, for few men can manage it aright, and those few are dangerous.

"Thank you, my dear Crayton," he answered, his wide and homely mouth transfigured by a smile of genuine pleasure. "I accept the challenge gladly! I return your verbal gauntlet with one small warning: Don't forget that your wife lives in Chicago!"

Crayton rocked on his feet as though beneath a blow. His heavy, brutally dominant face became mottled, then was overspread by a mortal pallor. What the words meant, he did not know; but he knew. With a single virulent oath, he turned on his heel and left the club.

A buttonhole Tomtit in one corner, and I was careful not to call him Tomtit by mistake.

"Half a mo', old man! You don't realize Crayton's ability, I'm afraid. He's a brute to have for an enemy. What's that about his wife in Chicago?"

Tomtit regarded me, and there was a peculiar shadow in his wide gray eyes.

"Nothing," for publication," he said curtly. "What'd you do in my place?" "Leave China tomorrow," I answered with sober emphasis. "I mean it! Crayton is wealthy. He is agent for several big dealers back home, also for a number of millionaire Jap clients. He sends out more antiques and museum pieces than the rest of you chaps combined. He has influence."

"Ah!" said Tomtit with an an-grin. "But don't forget that I'm a poet! Thanks, old man. Thanks and all that. Now I must be off."

I watched him go from the club and regretfully shook my head. He was rather new in China, and that if I interfered with Crayton's affairs he would be murdered. You may think that is stretching it a bit; but if you know anything about the scarcity of antiquities in China, the jealousy and enmity and crime behind the securing of these pretty objects sold on Fifth avenue, you know that I am not exaggerating.

THE mandarin Wing, who lived in a charming old temple-suburb of Fuchow, was a survivor of the imperial regime. He clung to its traditions of art and concubines and ruthless ways; he was not old, but he was poor. All he had left was his family collection of art, and once every two years or so he sold a piece of this. It was like pulling a tooth.

Wing had once been a diplomat in London, and was an educated gentleman, with cultivated appreciation of occidental things, combined with passionate love for the art of his own people. Every agent and dealer in China was on the qui vive to get something from Wing's treasures.

You must understand that there are various classes of dealers. Some ship imitation junk to interior decorators, with waxy, waxy color; others supply wholesale bric-a-brac to artists and dealers of the profession, some really artistic things, museum pieces. Under this last head fell Crayton, who was a business man, and Tomtit, who was a poet.

Tomtit naturally suggested Tomtit, and "Little Tomtit" had been fast one of the poet from the first. Calmly oblivious, he went his way and created chaos among his competitors. He had his own methods of doing business, and they were apt to be surprising at times. He came to Fuchow with letters of introduction to Wing from a Chinese official, and the mandarin welcomed him with grave courtesy. There was no mention of business, though each man knew that the other man understood perfectly.

Immediately he came into the house Tomtit perceived that something was terribly amiss. The servants were frightened. Wing himself, a stately man with wavy beard and mustaches, wore an air of preoccupation. The tea was inferior in quality. Host and guest, however, ignored all this and exchanged many compliments.

At dinner Tomtit saw the screen for which he had been waiting. It was the only object in the room, a screen of three panels. The center panel held a painting on brown silk, showing a groom or syce with his horse beneath a gnarled tree. The two side

panels were of blank brown silk, bearing only the vermilion seals of mandarins who had owned the screen. Tomtit expressed his admiration, and the mandarin discussed the screen with loving tenderness.

"You will observe that there are six ideographs," said Wing complacently. "The first four read 'Ku Mo San Mow'—Old Syce and Traveling Horse. The others give the name of the artist, Chang Mow or Jung Mow—a Manchurian name, I think. The artist is not remembered. The entire value of the picture, Mr. Tomtit, lies in—"

"In the red robe of the old syce," said Tomtit. The mandarin beamed approval.

"Good, good! Yes, that red robe is painted with some precipitate of gold, and the secret of this dusky,

polite note suggesting that he sell the Chang Mow screen to Crayton. What can he do? No Chinaman dares to infringe the sovereignty of the Japanese quarter. The mandarin might know exactly where Miss Tsing is held prisoner; he might know exactly where to find her, he might know exactly who carried her away—and what can he do? Just nothing. That's straight goods, Tomtit! Japanese magistrates would simply laugh at him. A Jap can walk into our city and shoot me, for instance, then go back to his own quarter—and remain untouched!"

Tomtit sucked at his pipe for a moment, regarding his informant narrowly.

"Look here!" he exclaimed suddenly. "How'd you know so much, anyhow?"

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So Tomtit strode along as though to pass the rooming house. Opposite the entrance he suddenly turned, and in two strides had his hand on the door-knob. He opened it, stepped inside, and closed the door behind him.

AN instant later he would not have obtained entrance. Two slant-eyed men were already in the hallway, hands under their robes. His entry had halted their advance. Tomtit regarded them with a keen scrutiny and shoved his right hand into his pocket. The menace of this gesture was significant.

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